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Interview with Katina Strauch

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Julia Gelfand

This issue features an interview with Katina Strauch (strauchk@cofc.edu), Head of Collection Development at the College of Charleston Library in Charleston, South Carolina. Katina is one of the most colorful personalities in our profession and this interview touches on various ways that librarians around the globe are acquainted with her and shares some of her passions about her work and the activities in which she is currently involved. Jumping to the end of the interview, we learn about her candidacy for President of the American Library Association in the 2002 election. If you have never attended the Charleston Conference, we now expect the registration to increase, as readers of this interview will very likely want to attend. The editors hope that you enjoy the content of this interview as much as we did and look forward to participation and activities by Katina as her dreams and ideas expand.

LHTN. Your name, Katina Strauch, is synonymous with the Charleston Conference, which has been held each November for over 21 years. This Conference has gained popularity and credibility, as it has grown to be the major venue for librarians, publishers, vendors and information providers to exchange ideas. Please share how you grew this concept and why you remain so attached to the Conference and the role that you think it plays for each of those groups in today's working world and marketplace.

KS. I started the Charleston Conference in 1980 when I was a brand-new acquisitions librarian with no experience, no travel money, but a lot of energy. I was working in a library with two especially creative and energetic people, Cerise Oberman and Ralph Melnick. They encouraged me to do a conference and I was too young and naïve to know what I was getting into. After that, people like Janet Flowers, Bill Schenck, and Tom Leonhardt helped get speakers and spread the word. The Conference is a testimony to the dedicated acquisitions, collection development, technical services, library directors, book vendors, serials vendors, publishers, and many other professionals who come every year, give papers and presentations, and spread the word to their colleagues.

The Conference is my lifeline. It's where I learn the most every year. It's where I can ask questions and get answers; it's where I can get ideas, meet old and new friends. It's where I can become encouraged and optimistic about the profession of librarianship and know that we will survive. We solve problems together. It's very much a group of professionals working out problems and solutions together.

LHTN. As if the Charleston Conference was not a sufficiently big challenge to meet every year, you are also the owner and editor-in-chief of *Against the Grain*. The magic of the conference transcends to this effort, and many colleagues tell me that this publication is among their favorites to read and use as a professional awareness tool. Now in its 13th

volume, this journal is a symbiotic relationship of the same constituencies that seem to be involved in Collection Development/ Management, Acquisitions, Access, Bibliographic Control of library resources. What is it like to be an editor? What are your goals for the publication?

KS. I like to write and I love to see things come together in print. As the conference developed, I felt that there was a real need for some sort of vehicle that allowed people to keep in contact more than only once a year. I think of myself more as a facilitator than an editor. I try to observe what's happening and try to get people to talk about what they think about a specific issue. I believe that the best solutions only come about through collaboration and open communication.

Against the Grain in print and online needs to continue to grow and develop based on what's happening in our profession and with our readers. I hope to continue to get many ideas from others! In the next few years, I plan to work to grow the ATG Web site, including surveys and polls of readers, more dialog between readers, and more active communication among all of us.

LHTN. In order to plan for these two major extracurricular arenas in your life, upon whom and what do you depend for input? How does this evolve? Most importantly, how do you sustain it?

KS. With the help of many, really countless people. I have four associate editors - Rosann Bazirjian, Barbara Dean, Joyce Ogburn and Celia Wagner as well as numerous associate editors - Sever Bordeianu, Eleanor Cook, Tony Ferguson, Tom Gilson, Ned Kraft, Margaret Landesman, Tom Leonhardt, Jack Montgomery, Sandy Paul, Pamela Rose, and I could go on and on - all of whom really keep the publication going. I also read lots of listservs and print publications to see what people are talking about. Since I work in acquisitions and collection development myself, there is a resonance with certain issues. Against the Grain is great fun and I love doing it. Also, I would be remiss if I didn't mention my two children, Raymond and Ileana, and my husband, Bruce, who frequently pick up the slack to let their mother and wife get on with the deadlines.

LHTN. You have addressed many critical agendas as they affect library collections. In light of the current economic climate, what challenges do you think will be most daunting to the library community over the next few years? What skills should we cultivate and possess to address and respond to them in the most thoughtful and meaningful ways?

KS. Many things come to mind. Budgets are always tight and, especially now, with the recession looming large, many of us are looking at unwelcome cuts in our materials budgets and staff as well. But I would point to counteracting competition from the many commercial entities out there who are getting into the business of libraries as our biggest challenge right now. Questia, Pipeline, and other commercial companies which fashion and market themselves as "libraries." For the first time, libraries and librarians are encountering people in business that want to get in on what we do best. What we used to do didn't seem that enviable, but now it involves computers, technology, money, and information. It seems

"sexier" and more people want to get into the act. Libraries and librarians have to become more adamant, more active, more self-assured, perhaps more focused than we have been in the past.

LHTN. We should not forget that you have a regular full-time job at the College of Charleston. What exactly is your position there and how does it inform you and ground you on the day-to-day realities of academic librarianship?

KS. I am the Head of Collection Development at the College of Charleston Libraries. I was a medical reference and audiovisual librarian until I got married and was looking for a library job in Charleston. I "lucked into" acquisitions and collection development work. I wouldn't want to do anything else. It is scholarship, business, and librarianship rolled into one. And every day is different and has a different set of problems and issues to contend with.

LHTN. You conduct some very interesting interviews with some major personalities in the library and information worlds. What challenges do you see leadership in those environments currently facing and what common personality traits do such people possess in order to be successful in today's confusing business world? Are you inspired by any people in particular?

KS. I love interviewing people. You usually have to do research before you start and then you can put on your "journalist" hat and ask questions that you wouldn't necessarily ask otherwise. I always learn something from every interview and am inspired by some aspect of what the person that I interview is doing. The people that work with books, libraries, and information are committed professionals who want to improve the world in which we all live and work.

LHTN. A couple of years ago, you and Becky Lenzini began another venture, called The Charleston Advisor. Please tell us about that project, what goals you have for that, and how it has been received in the marketplace.

KS. I was sitting in my office surrounded by computer printouts of electronic databases that my library was evaluating for purchase. There was a review here and there, but largely there was a dearth of information about many of these electronic products which were very expensive and largely unknown. Becky and I started brainstorming and The Charleston Advisor, of which Becky Lenzini is the publisher and editor-in-chief, was born. TCA has been well-accepted in the marketplace and is a necessary tool for collection development and reference librarians and library directors alike.

LHTN: You retain a legacy that you not only are a practicing librarian, and write non-fiction, but are also engaged in serious mystery writing. When in your busy calendar do you devote time to this and please share with us some of your current writing projects?

KS. Like I said earlier, I love to write and fiction is probably my biggest love. I see "plots" everywhere. My husband and I have written five "mass market horror" novels together.

About a year ago, I started a library murder mystery (about a collection development librarian, no less), but, what with ATG, TCA and now running for ALA President, I've had to put fiction writing largely on the back-burner for a while.

LHTN. So, what about e-Books? Are they here to stay, or will they enjoy a short life - what is your prophecy about the technology required to sustain this product line?

KS. I think that e-Books are here to stay. They complement and enhance printed books in that they can be searched word by word, they can be printed out for detailed study, and they can be taken apart and codified. I don't think, however, that they will replace the printed book, even in the hard sciences. Printed books allow you to get a sense of organization at a glance that is not possible on the computer screen, they are easy to carry around and use anywhere, and keeping a copy of a printed book that you consider a classic for your personal library is the best archival alternative. In terms of technology required to sustain the product line, I think that entrepreneurs will continue to innovate. The more crucial question is whether or not the technology will be affordable for most libraries, especially public libraries.

LHTN. You have received numerous awards and accolades and have the chance to meet a variety of people. There is a concern that there are insufficient numbers of people entering our profession. When you talk to potential librarians, how do you characterize the opportunities we offer for contributions to service, cultural heritage, influencing instruction, developing technologies, and working with a wide range of users?

KS. I believe that the profession is too hard on itself and that has hurt our ability to rise as a group. Everyone is dumb about something and everyone is smart about something. Librarians know a lot about information and knowledge. They know how to organize it, collect it, access it, evaluate it. These are skills that are needed regardless of the format of the information.

I believe that librarianship needs to spend more time cultivating its body of knowledge about itself. We need to do more research about information and knowledge and how they are used as well as about ourselves as professionals. We need to re-invent ourselves as a dynamic profession. We need more librarians with computer and technical skills, we need more librarians who want to conduct practical research about libraries. We need more committed librarians.

LHTN: As if Katina Strauch is not committed enough to serving the library and information producing communities, she has accepted the invitation to run for Vice-President/ President-Elect of the American Library Association in the 2002 election. This organization of nearly 60,000 members is the largest association of library personnel in the world. What are the critical issues you are addressing in your campaign and want the readers of LHTN to know about you, as many of them may be potential voters? You can certainly give yourself a plug and introduce your platform to us and tell us what persuaded you to accept this invitation.

KS. There are many reasons for accepting this invitation - issues that are nearest and dearest to me are:

1. Empowering users. All libraries must work toward the common goal of providing access to current accurate information for everyone. Libraries must educate users on the value of good, current, useful and reliable information. Information literacy is key. ALA must facilitate research and study of key areas of interest to all librarians - filtering, privacy, copyright and fair use in the digital world. By making information freely available, ALA will assure that the role which librarians can play in the development of strategies will be enhanced.
2. Preserving access. Archiving of electronic materials must move to the forefront of ALA's agenda. Libraries must strive to strengthen fair use of digital information, We must assure the accessibility of electronic information for all users, especially those with visual or physical impairments. Working with publishers and government officials, we must assure that copyright is observed but does not block the use of information for posterity.
3. Our profession. Demographic and statistical information about professional librarians, their number, characteristics, and distribution across the country as well as their status and pay must be compiled systematically by ALA and shared with members on a regular basis. Armed with such information, the profession must raise their pay and professional welfare. I wholly support the strive of Mitch Freedman's Task Force on Pay Equity and will strive to continue this work during my tenure as ALA President.
4. How to work smarter. Librarianship must become more active as a profession. The profession has changed, as the world around us has changed. Libraries and librarians must change as well. No longer is the library a passive storehouse of printed information. The new library is a linchpin in the community providing access to every variety of information in all formats. The library provides access to information beyond its physical location. As such, librarians should be and are leaders in locating, accessing and organizing this information. As a profession, we must become more computer- savvy, more engaged in research and study of the issues that impact libraries, more active in determining our own destiny and the destiny of information and knowledge in its effect on civilization.

Specifically, my platform and goals are:

- I pledge to work for increased funding for libraries.
- I pledge to work with publishers and all stakeholders to bring about fair use of electronic information and to assure that information is archived for posterity.
- I pledge to work with library educators and other stakeholders to assure that librarians of the twenty-first century are trained appropriately to take their place among key professionals in the information chain.

- I pledge to uphold ALA's stand with the Digital Millennium Act and CIPA.
- I pledge to work with the Task Force on Pay Equity for all librarians.
- I pledge to work with ethnic minorities to encourage diversity in all types of libraries, library schools, and ALA.
- I pledge to listen to you!

More details about my candidacy can be found at the campaign Web page at <http://www.katina.info> and I invite you to visit that Web site.

LHTN. When someone phones you, your voice mail contains a daily message. As a prolific reader, how do you determine what is the most appropriate message on a given day? Do you keep a record of all these quotations? Do you describe yourself as a spiritual person and what does that mean to you?

KS. I collect quote books and, off and on, I have started compilations of quotations on specific subject areas, but that is something I will have to do more systematically when I have more time. I have become more spiritual as I have gotten more mature and as I have grown up with my children.

LHTN. Conducting this interview has been a real pleasure. We wish you the best in the upcoming ALA elections and look forward to many future Charleston Conferences and ATG issues.